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041220Z Apr 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000659

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR SA/INS
USPACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: SO MANY
STRIKES, SO FEW DEGREES

REF: COLOMBO 615

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Despite a constitutional duty to ensure "universal and equal access to education at all levels," the state-run national university system in Sri Lanka, hamstrung by politicization, resource shortfalls and successive debilitating strikes, accommodated fewer than 14 percent of qualified secondary school graduates in 2004. Intensive political opposition--primarily from government coalition partner Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)--has successfully shut down, at least for the time being, Government plans to accommodate some of the overflow by expanding the number of private degree-awarding institutions. In the north, administrators and students at the University of Jaffna face some of the same challenges as their southern counterparts, with the added complication of the near-monolithic influence of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ideology. Although administrators and students seem to realize that the current education provided by the state-run university system does not adequately prepare a sufficient number of students for the competitive modern job market, any proposed reforms are certain to elicit vehement and well-orchestrated opposition from the JVP. End summary.

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION:
FREE BUT NOT UNIVERSAL

12. (U) The responsibility of the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) to provide free university education to all qualified citizens is, like so many other social entitlements enshrined in the Constitution, one that the GSL is hard put to satisfy adequately. (Note: Article 27 (2) (h) of the Constitution lists "the complete eradication of illiteracy and the assurance to all persons of the right to universal and free access to education at all levels" as one of numerous Directive Principles of State Policy guiding Parliament, the President and the Cabinet toward "the establishment of a just and free society." End note.) Constrained by resource shortfalls, hamstrung by divisive partisan politics, and plagued by recurrent and debilitating strikes, the overburdened state-run university system, which consists of 13 regional universities and one extension school, could offer places to fewer than 14 percent of qualified secondary school graduates in 2004 (14,850 students out of the 108,000 who passed the national examinations). By offering 14 new degree programs, the University Grants Commission (UGC), which administers the national university system, expects to expand the number of slots available to 16,255 in 2005--a modest improvement that still leaves more than 90,000 qualified students out of luck and out of school each year. (Note: Not included in these statistics are the estimated additional 90,000 students who complete the requisite amount of advanced level schooling, sat for the national examination and do not pass. If these students are added to the equation as well, the state-run university system accommodated just over 7 percent of competing secondary school students in 2004. Universities abroad, primarily in India, absorb about another 2 percent, according to UGC estimates. End note.)

ON THE CURRICULUM:
PARTISAN WRANGLING, STAGING STRIKES

13. (U) Once admitted to these elite ranks, students, especially lower-income students from outlying areas who must rely on state-funded dormitories for housing, are subject to intensive political lobbying-cum-indoctrination by the affiliated student wings of parties in control at particular dormitories, according to administration and student sources.

The student wing of the pro-Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has long been the most extensively organized and most influential group, particularly among liberal arts students. The JVP union dominates the liberal arts schools of 11 of Sri Lanka's 13 national universities (Jaffna and Eastern Universities, in the predominantly Tamil north and east respectively, are the exceptions). (Not surprisingly, the rigorous academic standards demanded of law, medical, engineering and (to some extent) management students have left little free time for politicking, and the JVP, according to most accounts, has thus not developed a substantial foothold among those populations.) Annual student elections provide a predictably bitter forum for partisan politics to polarize and divide student bodies, often resulting in physical clashes between groups, strikes to protest an unfavorable election result, or (more commonly) both.

14. (U) Nor are strikes limited to protests against election outcomes. Instead, student unions are commonly mobilized (again, most often by the JVP) to strike on a variety of pretexts, including a wide range of GSL policies. A quick review of the current state of play at universities across the country on April 4 revealed the following:

--Ruhuna University (in the southern district of Matara) closed for over a month due to student strikes;

--Colombo University: Arts and Law schools re-opened April 1 after a 10-day closure imposed by strikes; Management school, on strike throughout March over student elections, scheduled tentatively to reopen April 18;

--Sri Jayawardenapura University closed for 10 days in March due to clashes/strikes; closed again the first week of April due to ongoing political strife;

--Peradeniya University (Kandy): violence between pro- and anti-JVP students April 3 prompted a faculty decision to close down the campus for an undetermined amount of time;

--University of Jaffna: closed last week of March because of a strike by non-academic staff protesting the dismissal of the Registrar; strike by a rival union threatened for the first week of April.

JVP ISSUE DU JOUR: "PRIVATIZATION"

15. (SBU) Most of the current strikes disrupting studies at universities over the past month were prompted by JVP opposition to administration plans to address the shortage of university slots by allowing selected private institutions to award degrees in some fields. About 10 such "degree-granting" institutions have already been recognized by the UGC. According to UGC Chairman B.R.R.N. Mendis, however, President Kumaratunga directed that applications from another five be kept on hold after vigorous opposition to the proposed expansion from JVP-aligned student groups, who have branded the initiative as yet another GSL attempt at "creeping privatization." A member of an opposing student union speculated that the JVP, which views the state-run university system as its exclusive breeding ground for future die-hard politicians, sees the move as potentially undermining the party's monopolistic grip on young students. Private degrees will not be free, the student reasoned, leaving candidates in those programs little spare time to engage in strikes and other political activities. UGC Chairman Mendis voiced the same theory, and offered the following additional interpretations: (a) Recipients of private degrees may prove more competitive in the global job market than those educated by the public sector; (b) GSL failure to meet the demand for university slots strengthens JVP claims of Government mismanagement/malfeasance/disregard for the masses.

VIEW FROM JAFFNA:
NO JVP, BUT STILL STRIKING

16. (SBU) The University of Jaffna, while spared a hyperactive, strike-prone JVP student union, faces other significant challenges. Students there are free from the worries and disruptiveness of partisan politics on campus; the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) provides the only political ideology on offer. (Note: The JVP student wing maintains a nominal branch at the Jaffna campus as well, but it is not politically active. End note.) According to University Vice Chancellor Professor S. Mohanadas, students in Jaffna "strike frequently" (usually to protest some step by the GSL or the Sri Lankan Army--Army vehicle accidents are a common pretext) "but not very long." A strike during the last week of March was called by one union representing university staff to protest the dismissal of the Registrar; a rival union, on the other hand, threatened to strike if the Registrar were reinstated. Despite these mutually exclusive

demands, Professor Mohanadas expressed confidence that the issue would soon be resolved.

17. (SBU) The national standard imposed on northern students--who must complete their secondary education in sub-standard facilities--creates wide disparity, the Vice Chancellor indicated. While the south may suffer from a surfeit of too many qualified students and too few slots, the north has the reverse problem: too few students even qualify for admission. Because students from the north are typically weaker in English than their southern counterparts, he noted, many local applicants cannot pass the examination. Mohanadas said that he had requested the UGC to grant an additional 5 percent quota for students from especially underprivileged areas (i.e., the LTTE-controlled Wanni) in the budget for 2006. Similar previous requests have been turned down by the UGC, he reported, on the grounds that slots for southern students would also have to be increased commensurately.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) A surplus of 93,000 advanced level graduates kept out of the university system is clearly a need that the private sector can help fill. Competition among private institutions could help ensure higher standards and graduates better equipped to meet the needs of a global marketplace. This is not, however, a need that the JVP, despite its rhetoric about helping the masses, finds politically expedient to meet. A more competitive university system could reduce the JVP's virtually unopposed grazing rights among student populations, thereby inhibiting its ability to expand its membership and entrench its hold among well-educated but under-employed Sri Lankan youth. As with other proposed reforms (Reftel), the JVP can be expected to invoke the "privatization" bete noir to keep this eminently sensible GSL initiative at bay.

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